 Reading time: 5 min.

In the common imagination ‘missions’ are about the south of the world, in reality it is not a geographical criterion at the basis and Europe is also a destination for Salesian missionaries: in this article we talk about the Netherlands.

When Don Bosco dreamt, between 1871 and 1872, of “barbarians” and “savages”, according to the language of the time, tall in stature and with fierce faces, dressed in animal skins walking in an area completely unknown to him with missionaries in the distance, in whom he recognised his Salesians, he could not have foreseen the enormous development of the Salesian Congregation in the world. Thirty-five years later – 18 years after his death – the Salesians would found their first province in India and 153 years later India became the first country in the world in terms of number of Salesians. What Don Bosco could not have imagined at all is that Indian Salesians would come to Europe, particularly the Netherlands, to work as missionaries and to live and experience their vocation.

Let us meet Fr Biju Oledath sdb, born in 1975 in Kurianad, Kerala, southern India. A Salesian since 1993, he arrived in the Netherlands as a missionary in 1998, after studying philosophy at the Salesian college in Sonada. After his practical training, he completed his theological studies at the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium. In 2004, he was ordained a priest in India and served as a young priest in the parish of Alapuzha, Kerala, before returning the following year to the Netherlands as a missionary. He currently lives and works in the Salesian community in Assel.

In Fr Biju’s heart, when he was young, was the seed of the mission *ad gentes* and, in particular, the desire to be destined for Africa, inspired by his Indian brothers who left for Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. This missionary dream was fuelled by their stories and all the material they wrote, letters and articles about Salesian work in Africa. However, his superiors thought he was still too young and not yet ready for this step and his family also thought it was too dangerous for him to leave at that time. Fr Biju tells us, “Looking back, I agree with them: I had to complete my initial formation first and I really wanted to study theology at a good university. It would not have been so easy in those countries at the time.”

But if the missionary desire is sincere and comes from God, the moment of the call always arrives: the Salesian missionary vocation, in fact, is a call within the common

call to consecrated life for the Salesians of Don Bosco. So in 1997 Fr Biju was offered the mission *ad gentes* in Europe, in the Netherlands, certainly a very different project from missionary life in Africa. After his practical training, he would study theology at the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium). “I had to swallow for a moment, but I was still happy to be able to leave for a new country”, Fr Biju admits. He was determined to travel the world for the sake of young people.

It is not obvious to know the place where one is sent as a missionary, perhaps one has heard something about the country or some story about it. “I had already heard about the Netherlands, I knew it was below sea level and I had read a story about a child who put his finger in a dam to prevent a flood, thus saving the country. I immediately started looking for a world atlas and at first I had some difficulty finding it among all the other big European countries.” Fr Biju’s father was still against it, worried about the distance and the long journey, while his mother urged him to obey his vocation and follow his dream of happiness.

Before reaching Europe, there was a long wait to obtain a visa for the Netherlands. Thus, Fr Biju was destined to work with street children in Bangalore. In mid-December 1998, on a cold winter day, he finally arrived at Amsterdam airport, where the provincial and two other Salesians were waiting for the Indian missionary. The warm welcome compensated for the culture shock of approaching a new place, very different from India, where it is always hot and many people live in the streets. Enculturation takes time to get used to, getting to know and understand dynamics that are totally unknown at home.
Fr Biju’s first year was spent getting to know the different Salesian houses and works: “I realised that there are really nice people and I started to adapt to all these new impressions and habits. The Netherlands is not only cold and rainy, but also beautiful, sunny and warm. The Salesians were very kind and hospitable to Fr Biju, concerned to make him feel comfortable and at home. Certainly the way the Dutch live their Christian faith is very different from India, and the impact can be shocking: big churches with few people, mostly elderly, different songs and music, a more humble style. On top of that, Fr Biju tells us, “I really missed the food, the family, the friends… especially the closeness of young Salesians my own age around me.” But as the understanding of the situation improves, the differences begin to make sense and make sense.

To be an effective Salesian missionary in Europe, working in a secularised society often requires adaptability, cultural sensitivity and a gradual understanding of the

local context, which cannot be obtained overnight. This work requires patience, prayer, study and reflection that help to discover the faith in the light of a new culture. This openness allows missionaries to dialogue with sensitivity and respect with the new culture, recognising the diversity and plurality of religious values and perspectives.
Missionaries must develop a deeply rooted personal faith and spirituality in the place where they are, as men of prayer, in the face of declining rates of religious affiliation, less interest or openness to spiritual matters, and the absence of new vocations to religious/Salesians life.
There is a great risk of getting lost in a secularised society where materialism and individualism are prevalent and there may be less interest or openness to spiritual matters. If one is not careful, a young missionary can easily fall into religious and spiritual scepticism and indifference. In all these moments, it is important to have a spiritual director who can guide one to the right discernment.

Like Fr Biju, there are some 150 Salesians who have been sent all over Europe since the beginning of the new millennium, to this continent in need of re-Christianisation, where the Catholic faith needs to be reinvigorated and sustained. Missionaries are a gift for the local community, both Salesian and at the level of the Church and society. The richness of cultural diversity is a reciprocal gift for those who welcome and for those who are welcomed, and helps to open horizons by showing a more “catholic”, i.e. universal, face of the Church. Salesian missionaries also bring a breath of fresh air to some Provinces that are finding it difficult to make a generational change, where young people are less and less interested in vocations to the consecrated life.

Despite the trend towards secularisation, there are signs of a revival of spiritual interest in the Netherlands, particularly among the younger generations. In recent years, an openness to religiosity and a decline in anti-religious sentiments can be noted. This manifests itself in various forms, including alternative forms of being church, the exploration of alternative spiritual practices, mindfulness and the re-evaluation of traditional religious beliefs. There is an increasing need to assist young people, as a significant group of young people suffer from loneliness and depression, despite the general well-being of society. As Salesians, we must read the signs of the times to be close to young people and help them.

We see signs of hope for the Church, brought by migrant Christians arriving in Europe and by demographic, cultural and life changes in many local communities.

In the Salesian community of Hassel, young Christian immigrants from the Middle East often gather, bringing their vibrant faith, their opportunities and contributing positively to our Salesian community.
“All this gives me a great feeling and makes me realise how good it is to be able to work here, in what is initially a foreign country for me.”

Let us pray that the missionary ardour may always remain burning and that there will be no lack of missionaries willing to listen to God’s call to take his Gospel to all continents through the simple and sincere witness of life.

by Marco Fulgaro